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**FOLLETT HOUSE**

**DEPOT TOWN**

Ypsilanti, Michigan

E. Cross

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Architecture 503

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This past summer, I worked on an architectural survey of court facilities. The job allowed me to travel to many communities throughout Michigan. After completing the work at the courthouse, my partner and I would wander through each town and the central business district. The populations in each community varied as did the name and width of the main street yet every community had a main street with stores lining its edges. I became fascinated with the development of main streets in America and began to explore towns closer to Ann Arbor.

I had heard about an old community in Ypsilanti called Depot Town that had developed along the railroad tracks. The area was in Ypsilanti Historical District and I decided to find out exactly what existed in Depot Town. I entered Ypsilanti from the east and travelled east on Michigan Avenue gazing at the wide street and storefronts that lined its edges. In later readings, I would discover that this was the old Detroit-Chicago Road and the original plat for Ypsilanti was laid out around the intersection of the Huron River and the Detroit-Chicago Road. I continued to explore the town of Ypsilanti intent on discovering Depot Town. I headed north on Huron Street and upon reaching the old Ypsilanti City Hall on Huron and Cross stopped to look at the Huron River. As I looked across the river, there appeared to be a row of brick buildings on either side of Cross Street. I was fascinated by a red brick structure on the north side of Cross Street that had brick arches above the windows. I continued east on Cross Street and upon reaching the intersection of Cross Street, River Street and the railroad tracks, began to realize that I had found Depot Town. The area intrigued me and I wondered about the history of the street and what the tall building was that seemed to have an air of elegance.

I travelled to the Ypsilanti Historical Society and began to read about the history of Ypsilanti. The settlement of Ypsilanti began in 1823 when Benjamin Woodruff left Sandusky, Ohio and formed a new settlement west of Detroit named Woodruff Grove. In 1825, a road was laid through the Michigan Territory from Detroit to Chicago along an old Indian Trail that enabled the surveyor to avoid many physical obstacles and unfortunately the settlement of Woodruff Grove which laid three-quarters of a mile south of the new road.

The intersection of the road and the Huron River became part of the original plat of Ypsilanti. The original plat of Ypsilanti was bought by Judge Augustus Woodward of Detroit, John Stewart and William Harwood. The first house was built by Stewart in 1824 on the west side of the Huron River just north of the Detroit-Chicago Road. The downtown commercial area of Ypsilanti was platted in 1827 along the Huron River and Congress Street (Detroit-Chicago Road).

This began to explain the history of Ypsilanti but it didn't explain why there were two commercial areas in Ypsilanti. I went to the Bentley Historical Society and found a copy of the Story of Ypsilanti by Harvey Colburn. It was written to celebrate the centennial history of Ypsilanti and began to explain the origins of Depot Town.

The land was first developed by Mark Norris. He had come to Ypsilanti with his family from New York around 1825. He was a very prosperous business man and in 1827 bought land north of Congress Street in order to avoid the high land prices of downtown. Norris built the first sawmill on Frog Island which later helped to attract the Central Railroad to the east side of town. In 1834, a portion of Depot Town was platted and incorporated into the City of Ypsilanti. In 1838, the railroad line was completed as far west as Ypsilanti and the institution of passenger and freight brought a construction boom to Depot Town.

With the placement of the railroad east of the river, the east side of Ypsilanti could begin to compete with the west side of town. Mark Norris remained a prominent figure in the development of Depot Town. In 1840, one could survey the area that would become Main Street and find only dumping grounds for rubbish with a frequent mudhole. There was no bridge connecting East and West Cross and while the streets were laid out only the sawmill owned by Norris existed. The land did not remain vacant long and soon after the arrival of the railroad Mark Norris decided that there was the need for a hotel. In 1840, he built the Western Hotel and Tavern on the northwest corner of Cross and River. The hotel eventually floundered and was torn down in 1858 but it was the first of four hotels in Depot Town. Mark Norris now owned the hotel adjacent to the railroad as well as the sawmill on Frog's Island which brought timber business from all over the area because of the tremendous need for wood to fuel the trains and provide rail ties.

The railroad was a tremendous spur to business on the east side of the river and accelerated the growth of the east side of town to make it competitive with Congress St. By 1850, Depot Town was alive, businesses were flourishing along Cross Street including a flour mill, a large farmer's store, a cooper shop, a daguerreotype gallery, a lime kiln, a meat market, a self-styled post-office, a machine foundry, a blacksmith, carriage shop, a livery stable and a barber shop. In 1850, Mark Norris constructed the first Cross Street Bridge over the Huron River. After completing Colburn's book, I had learned the history of Depot Town and had seen a photo of the elegant brick structure that had kindled my interest. I continued my research at Eastern Michigan University library, the Ypsilanti Historical Society and the Bentley Historical Society. I discovered that the red brick building with arches over the windows was a former hotel with a ballroom. The name of the building was the Follett House and it was built by Benjamin

Follett in 1858. I began to read old Ypsilanti newspapers to find out more about Benjamin Follett.

Benjamin Follett was also a business man from New York who moved to Ypsilanti in the 1840's. He married Elvira Norris, Mark Norris's daughter and became involved in the development of Depot Town. Benjamin Follett had many business enterprises. In the 1850's he convinced the Michigan Central Railroad to build the present depot. (The depot was once a 3-story Queen Anne Structure that was partially destroyed by fire in 1900.) The depot also had municipal gardens surrounding the building which was called the Follett Depot. Newspaper articles claimed that the building had the distinction of being the handsomest on the Michigan Central Railroad with the exception of Chicago. Cross Street continued to grow. In the 1850's it was the center of business in Ypsilanti. In addition to the mills, Cross Street boasted the first street with paved gutters, the first fire station, the first clothing store, the first marble works and a bank owned by Benjamin Follett.

In addition to being associated with the depot and "the only bank considered safe"[1] in Ypsilanti, Follett was involved with lots of real estate ventures, a door, blind and sash business, insurance company, mills and a hotel. In 1865, shortly before his death, he was tied as the third richest man in Ypsilanti.

I now knew all about Benjamin Follett and began to understand his connection to the Follett House. The building was built in 1858 and opened on July 4, 1859. The hotel according to newspaper accounts was considered the finest hotel outside Detroit and the place where society events were held into the 1880's. The Follett House was the first brick building on the north side of Cross Street and once held law office, Follett's bank, hotel rooms and a

ballroom. The building was once "the grandest hotel on the Michigan Central Railroad line."[2]

The building was constructed mainly through the influence of Benjamin Follett and he eventually was full owner of the building. In addition to living quarters the Follett House also had community enterprises on the first floor, a dining room on the second floor which boasted steak dinners for 65 cents, drinks for 3 cents and trout from the Huron River. The third floor ballroom held prominent social events and theatrical performances until the 1880's. The ballroom was also used for travelling companies and such entertainers as Wild Bill Coty, Tom Thumb, The Bohemian Glass Blowers, Father Kemp's Old Folks and the Peak Family Bell Ringers were to have performed in the ballroom. The hotel's stationary read "house heated with steam, good sample rooms and free conveyance to any part of the city."[3]

After completing the historical documentation of the building and the history of Depot Town, I began to research the materials that were used to construct the building and the uses of the building. The building is a brick-bearing wall structure with hardwood floors and wood joist in the roof. The ballroom has wood arches that enable the room to have a clear span of 43'0" by 60'0". The floor of the ballroom at one time contained sound deadening powders that enabled the ballroom to be used without disturbing the people dining below. The windows in the building are wood-framed with six different types of plaster cornices. The building had a plaster cornice that was removed in the 1920's. The first floor commercial stores are close to original on the exterior. They are wood and glass with cast iron columns. The iron columns are marked McCullough. They could have come from the McCullough foundry located on Michigan Avenue east of the Huron River. Around the turn of the century the interiors of the commercial stores were renovated and several of the stores now

have pressed metal ceilings. The bricks used in construction probably came from the brickyard located on the northeast corner of Michigan Avenue and Adams Street just west of the opera house. It was classified as "one of the great brickyards"[4] of the state. The timber probably came from Follett's Mill on Frog Island that he owned in partnership with his father-in-law, Mark Norris. I visited the Ypsilanti Assessor's Office and the Washtenaw County Register of Deeds with the hopes of finding additional information on the materials. I did manage to piece together a history of the uses in the building. The building was sold by Benjamin Follett in 1864. It remained a hotel until the 1890's and according to the Sanborn Maps in 1900 the building was used as a factory to make mocassin shoes. In 1910, the Mayflower Cartage Company bought the building, ripped out most of the partitions, added an elevator and used the building for storage. They remained in the building until 1970 when it was abandoned. The building is presently owned by two people. The old hotel portion of the building has been converted into artist lofts with the first floor remaining commercial. The ballroom portion has studio apartments where the dining room was and there are plans to convert the ballroom into 2 story apartments. The room was ruined through rain damage and neglect but one can still see traces of flowered wallpaper and a deep rose paint color. There was once a huge circular stair that led up to the ballroom, gas chandeliers and a plaster sculptured ceiling (the medallions still remain). In talking to the owner, they had hopes of restoring the room to its previous glamour but they could not find any users for the space.

The Follett House is a typical mid-nineteenth century commercial structure. Its location is typical in southeastern Michigan. The area of Depot Town seems to have fallen asleep around the turn of the century. There are many possible reasons for the decline of commercial growth in Depot Town. Some possibilities are that both Mark Norris and Benjamin Follett died in 1865

and nobody took their places in pioneering the growth of the east side of Ypsilanti; the city fathers all lived on the west side, and all the money was spent on maintaining the west side the decline of the railroad industry and even as late as 1940's with the increased number of transient workers.

The unique idea of this study area is that two men pioneered its development and that it has survived as examples of mid-nineteenth century commercial architecture.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Ypsilanti Press. Ypsilanti, Michigan, August 23, 1979; page 8.
2. Ypsilanti Press. Ypsilanti, Michigan, May 29, 1974; page 14.
3. Ypsilanti Panorama. Ypsilanti, Michigan, June, 1978; page 4.
4. Colburn, Harvey, The Story of Ypsilanti, 1923; page 271.

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Maps from the Bentley Historical Library

Plat Map of Ypsilanti in 1825

Bird's Eye View of Ypsilanti in 1865

Map of Ypsilanti in 1879

Map of Ypsilanti in 1885

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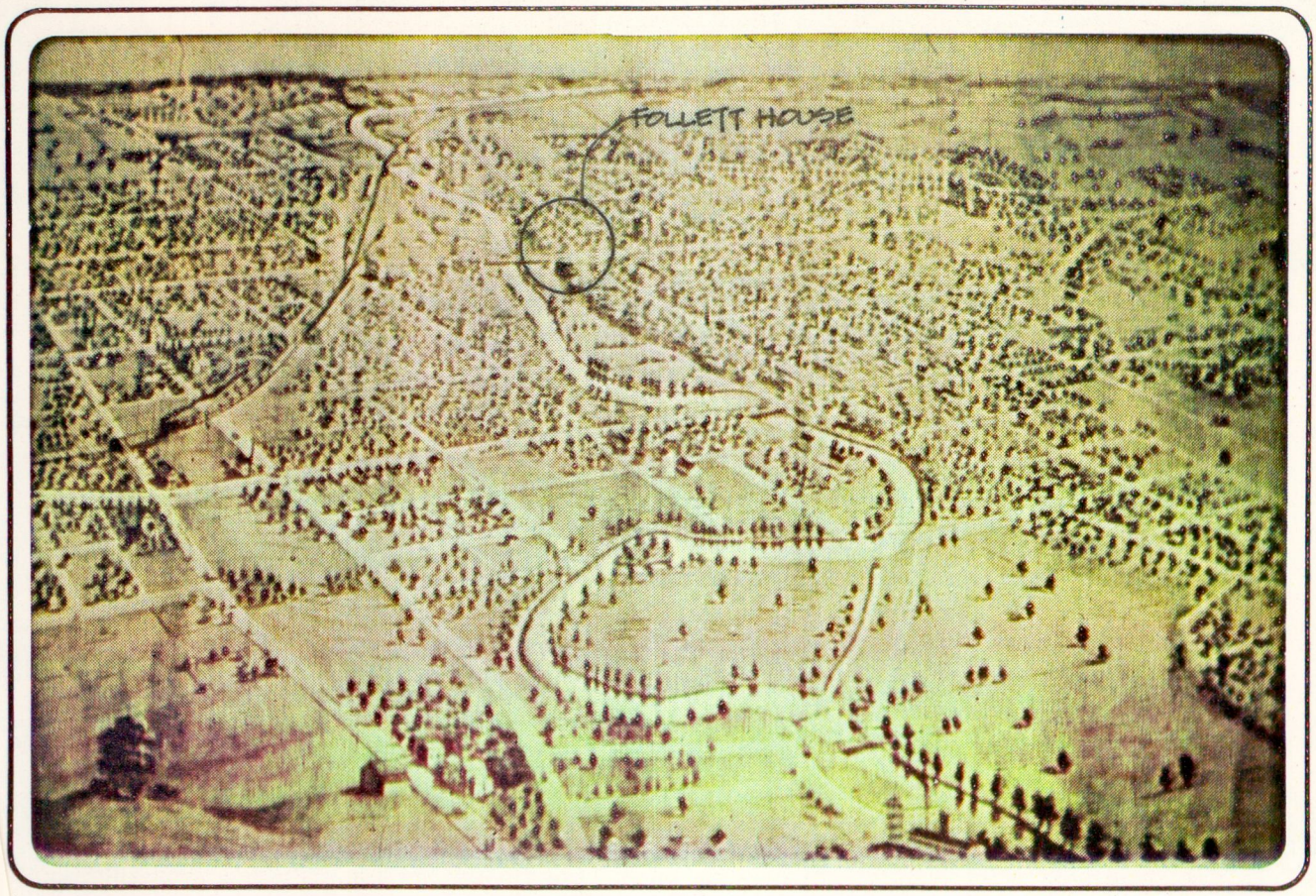
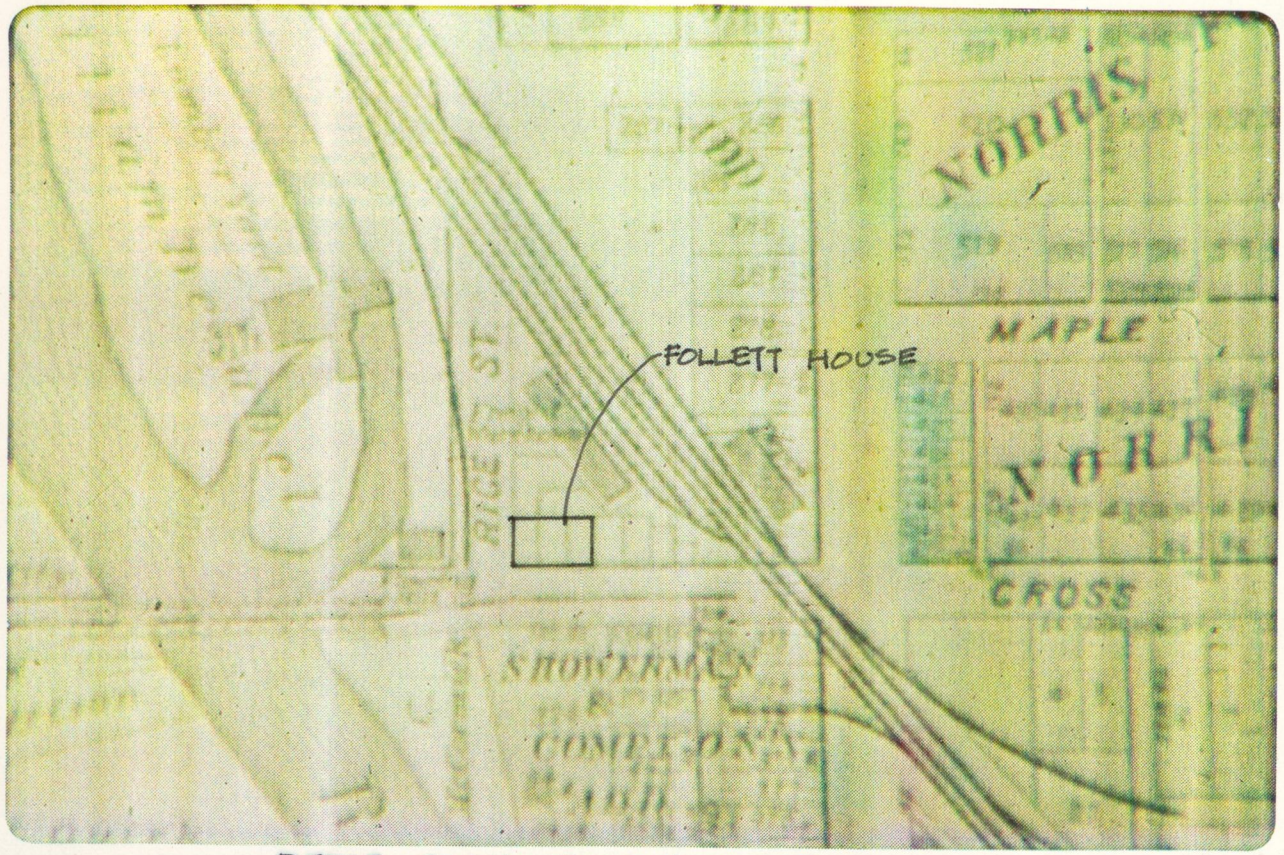
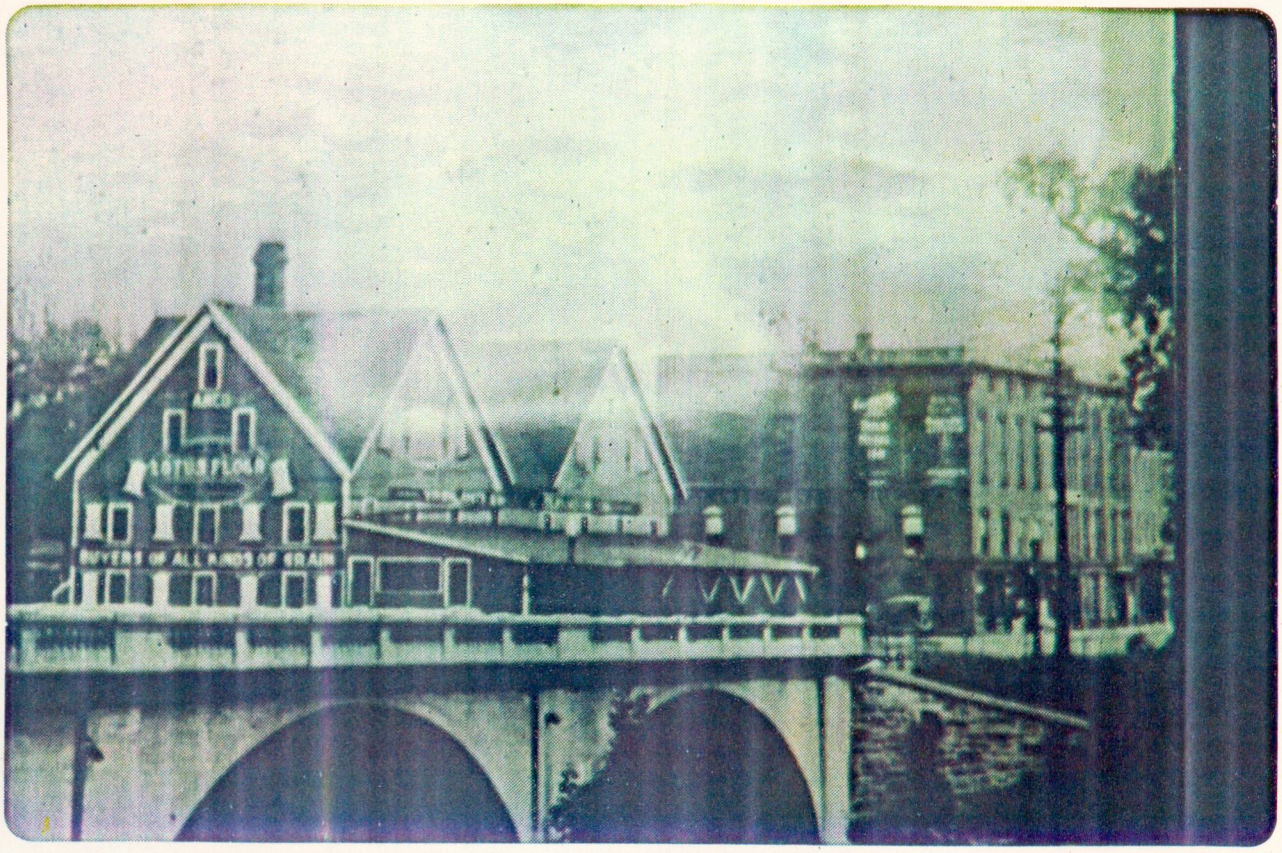



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF YPSILANTI · 1865




DEPOT TOWN · EAST YPSILANTI

1879




FOLLETT HOUSE · 1900

FOLLETT HOUSE 1980